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Special unit trained to track the Soviets

By Timothy Kenny
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Officially, it's called the U.S. Military Liaison Mission. Unofficially — but openly — the 14 men at Potsdam, East Germany, are trained to keep their eyes open to new sights in the Soviet military.

"It's a very hairy experience," said a former member of the U.S. mission quoted by The Associated Press. "There aren't any rules. It's a very dangerous job. It doesn't surprise me that someone was killed. I'm surprised it hasn't happened before."

The missions, set up at the end of World War II to channel military information among the Allies, have gradually evolved into intelligence-gathering units. They follow all movements, including maneuvers, of the 380,000 Soviet troops in East Germany.

Information is passed onto the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington. But the officers aren't spies; what makes them unique is that they openly travel the East German countryside carrying cameras.

"This has gone on for years with no change," says Edward Luttwak, a Soviet expert at a center for strategic and international studies. "They're spies only as much as any diplomat in Washington is a spy."

The French and British missions also are at Potsdam, 25 miles outside East Berlin. The Soviets use parallel missions at three West German sites.

The uniformed U.S. contingent — which lives in West Berlin — often spends several days at a time in East Germany, driving to Potsdam over the Glienicke bridge in U.S.-made cars with military markings.

And the U.S. cars, usually trailed by Soviet or East German agents, have beefed-up horsepower in case followers need to be shaken.

While no U.S. officer had been killed until this week, the game has turned rough before. In one case, a U.S. officer was drugged and his East German hotel room ransacked for information.

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